

New Fiction from Logan Hoffman-Smith: "Hunger"

There were sixteen of us before the storm hit: truants and runaways and young offenders, girls in insulated yellow snowsuits, left to the dark Montana cold. We marched like ants across the tree line. We were terrifying and tiny and gone. Above us, icicles swayed from conifers, threatening to crush us alongside the mountain passage's unstable walls of rock and snow. Only the counselors had radios. We had no say in where we'd go. The state had sent us to Bitterroot Wilderness Reform after we'd called our mothers bitches and spray painted tits onto bridges and robbed Safeways with unloaded guns, said we could choose to hike and talk about our feelings or go to juvie. We chose the mouths and crags of mountains, chose six weeks of litter-clearing and cold. We signed a form that swore if we died, Montana wasn't liable, that we weren't the kinds of girls anyone would come looking for. When the line of turkeys cut in front of us and a few girls jostled to look at them, one of our counselors, Candy, got bumped and slipped on an ice patch. The sound her head made against the ground was like a melon smashed against a brick. Wen reeled back and raised her hands to assert her innocence while I shielded my face and shouted "Wait!," but by the time we'd lowered our mittens, the fourteen girls in front of us were gone.



Ivan Shishkin, "In the Wild North," 1891. Museum of Russian Art, Kiev.

We could've run after them, but we had consciences. Maybe ulterior motives. We wouldn't leave someone to die. Snow scraped our reddened faces as the line of birds scrambled toward the nearby cave for cover, and the two of us huddled together until Wen separated and bent down in front of Candy,

her knees vanishing under the snow.

We'd been paired into twos when we first got here, asked to look out for and rely on another delinquent. For six weeks, we'd distribute supply weight between our shoulders, go to the bathroom when the other had to, match each other's footfalls step for step. Through our closeness, our scents would intermingle and become a new scent. Ideally, we would become indistinguishable from each other. Our counselors had linked Wen and me together due to the order of our last names, merged us as if under one skin. It was easier for them to keep track of us if we were accounted for together as if we were numbers instead of people, but Candy was different. We felt she wanted to know us. We wanted to know her.

When we first met Candy, she told us her real name was Candice but to call her Candy instead. Candy like sugar. Candy like something sweet. She greeted us on the roadside after we piled out of the van, and we shied away from her ringed fingers, from every white woman who'd hurt us before. The thing about sweetness was it was good in moderation but in excess, it rotted your teeth. The thing about white women was the kindness they promised was always too good to be true. I thought about the news story about the mother who'd adopted four children from China and shot them all in her basement. The mother who'd driven her eight adopted kids over a cliff. How, inexplicably, a woman who promised to care for you could turn on you, and how I didn't even care if I was murdered, so long as someone took me in, and, when the barrel was held to my forehead, promised this was a way I was loved.

Wen thought Candy could care about her because she didn't scowl at her like she was a hairy caterpillar under a magnifying glass or something. One of those pipe-cleaner-

haired creatures that conjured the same feeling as an uncle's pesto-filled mustache on your family's annual trip to Olive Garden: crusty and externally-organged but somehow alive. How amidst our wide berths and arctic glances, she, too, felt like a fuzzy thing under a magnifying glass, a too-large and duplicitous moth. She listened with the rest of us as our driver into the wilderness gave us our first lesson on nature and its relation to our humanity: a lecture on prey fowl and predatory birds.

"It's in the eyes, see," he said, a wad of jerky wedged between his teeth. "In the ratio of white to pupil. It's in the way they look at you, keen—there's a shine that non-raptors don't have. Big birds, always predators. Small ones, you've gotta check their beaks and eyes. Predators have mouths like hooks. Mouths for tearing. Mouths for skin." He paused as we passed an Avalanche Warning sign. Wen looked down at her hands, their breadth like loaves, knobbed and callused to garlic knots, and ran a finger over the cracks in her lips. Big birds, always predators. Big girls, hungry and dangerous too.

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"Okay, stand back. I, uh, saw this in a movie," Wen said. She cupped Candy's chin like a baby rabbit's, raised it carefully, then pressed gently with her arm against Candy's chest. Two pushes. Three. Nothing happened.

"Can you check her pulse?" I asked.

Wen pressed the back of her glove against Candy's neck, then shook her head. "I don't feel anything."

"Take your glove off."

Wen peeled her glove back and concentrated, her mouth screwing up as if she'd eaten a slice of sour grapefruit.

“A flutter?”

Alive, alive.

We paced around Candy’s body for a while, unsure of what to do or where to go. All week, we’d had people to yell at us or shepherd us into motion or prod us back into our line. Back home there was always at least someone to tell us to move faster or we’d be left behind. We stood alone and motionless for the first time, watched the snowfall as if we were infants trying to comprehend the moons of our mother’s faces. We heard the turkeys cackle from the cave but we made no sound. On the ground, where our feet once swam in evergreen needles, a coat of white gathered and hid signs of life. If we were normal girls, we might’ve taken handfuls of the new snow or stuck our tongues out to taste it. We might have marveled at how it tasted blue as mountains, tasted of fir trees and clear glass sky. If we’d been born better or less afraid, we might even have packed it in our hands and hurled it at each other like tickets from hometown arcade machines, but the truth was we didn’t know how. So instead, we stood motionless for a few minutes, then moved on.

The wind picked up, sending fragments of rock and ice from the formations above us and scraping red lines against our cheeks. Candy once said frostbite was most dangerous when you didn’t notice it, after you’d been outside too long and became numb. She told us this on one of the first nights when I woke up from a terror about being trapped under the snow. One of the program’s worst rules was weren’t allowed physical contact with each other outside of necessity, but Candy rubbed my shoulder, gave me the mercy of a caring touch. One night, she gave Wen her mushroom soup after she spilled hers, all the kindness we’d never known except for now.

We thought of Candy's warning as snow gathered inside the crevices of our snowsuits, gathering in small piles on our shoulders before blowing to the ground. The cold began to soak through our clothes and so we, like the turkeys, retreated to the little cave. We carried Candy with us to a dry spot and slid her drenched coat off her shoulders. We bundled her up in a sleeping bag. We kept her warm. We cleaned the gash on her forehead and pressed it with snow. We sat on a damp stone and counted the food we had between us: four sachets of Uncle Ben's ready rice (Tex Mex flavor: tomato, garlic, and puke), six blocks of shattered Maruchan chicken ramen, a carton of cashew-heavy trail mix, two packets of off-brand, likely expired Walmart fruit snacks, and an instant cup of mashed potatoes with a swollen lid. We tried to think of what to make and what the components of an actual meal were supposed to be. Candy looked so tiny in the sleeping bag, all nestled and motionless like a just-bathed sparrow shrunk to one-fourth its size. We thought of the way she carried a bag of popsicle stick jokes to share with us and walked beside us while we straggled, of how she only ever had praise for us and how she promised she'd never leave us behind. We thought of how stupid and corny she was when she talked about the importance of trees, and how we knew nothing about her but wanted so badly for her love.

"If one of you chickenshits lost the mac and cheese, I'm going to literally have an aneurysm," I remembered someone saying a couple of days ago. Wen had looked downward and I'd shaken my head. Under a tarp the night before, the two of us had caught each other staving our hunger on raw macaroni beneath the cover of night. Each of us had watched each other in the darkness, our tongues blue and eyes wide as searchlights. Our breaths circled each other. In the cave, we put our pot up above the fire and filled it with snow. The water came to a boil, and we poured in a packet of puke-tomato-rice. We

listened for the sound of bubbles, waited for that warm, gas station smell. We thought of how quickly a figment of warmth could become a vessel for all our hungers, for heat our bodies didn't have. We wondered: What would become of us in the morning? If we made it out of the wilderness? Where would we go? Under masks of shadow and firelight, we hid our pitiful thoughts from each other, wore the learned disguises of predatory birds. Or maybe we hadn't adopted curved beaks and claws as survival mechanisms but were instead born defective, and maybe our glimmers of innocence were merely tricks of the light.

There were things you learned when you didn't have anybody: how to float in a neighbor's bathtub and pretend it was the wide, cold ocean. How to fend for yourself and your siblings or you alone. What type of footsteps meant "bad" and what type of footsteps meant "good" and how to prepare yourself for either. How on the right morning on the right day of November you could convince yourself you were actually worth something and still be so stupid you got arrested for shoplifting the same day. How to bandage and cradle yourself after scraping your own knees against asphalt. How it was your own monstrosity that got you here and nobody else's. How if you used the right voice for the right story and fabricated exactly the right details, everyone would believe you. How if you broke yourself down into something perfect no one would know. How you could do everything, yes, everything, alone and be prepared for a heart attack or a tornado or a Montana blizzard, and how your aloneness made you immortal. How there was only one spot between the shelves of canned food in the Safeway the security cameras couldn't catch, and how if you ran every day you'd become faster than anyone, how you'd run fast enough to find a spot under the sun where you could lick a stolen ice cream cone for a few minutes, and nobody would come to run over you or your prize.

We waited for Candy to wake up, to move or make a noise or do anything. Without her, we were afraid and so lonely. We imagined ribboning our elbows against cave walls and crying just to feel her hands on our shoulders, for her to run circles against our backs, smooth and even. We wanted to curl into ourselves and become infants again – back before we'd done anything wrong, when a womb was an ocean and we only had to be passengers. Back when our lungs didn't work and we slept when our mothers slept and we fed ourselves through the gristled tripe of her stomach. Back when the sun didn't exist unless she saw it. We wanted to ask what we'd done wrong and what we'd done to deserve this. We wanted to ask: why is the sun warm and why does it burn? We wanted to know why there was no "d" in "refrigerator" but there was in "fridge," why there was salt in both the ocean and the blackheads lodged in our noses. We wanted to know where the world came from: its burnt archipelagos, snow and sky. We wanted to know why continents were ridged but not planets and what the deal was with white people and farmers' markets. We wanted to know why our mothers didn't love us and because they didn't, if she could. *"Tell us a story,"* we wanted to ask, so we could curl into her voice like a pillow fort and stay there forever. So we could hold on forever and not let go.

Wen and I took our sleeping bags, zipped ourselves together, and crawled inside. We held each other like sea otters through the cold. After Wen fell asleep, I worried about how something precious could always be taken from us in an instant. If Candy died, she'd kill the girls we'd whittled so carefully from our own bodies for her, the girls she believed us to be, the girls she wanted to hold. If she woke up different or changed her mind about our goodness, I knew we'd morph into something monstrous, who we'd been and who we'd always be. In the silence, I crept towards Candy's motionless body. I checked

her pulse, *alive, alive, alive*. Wen made a frightened sound in her sleep and I crawled back under the sleeping bag, and we became us again, and we hoped she'd die or wouldn't die there, and in the morning, we sifted for something to eat.